

House Bill 440

March 13, 2207

Presented by Chris Smith

Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

As originally drafted, HB 440 would have created several problems for FWP and, in all probability, would have forced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to terminate the delisting process for wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains. As amended and passed by the House, this bill no longer threatens delisting. However, because it simply directs FWP to do things we are already doing, FWP does not think HB 440 is necessary.

The language in Subsection (4)(a), as amended on lines 27 through 30 on page 1 and line 1 on page 2 of the bill directs FWP to evaluate the assumptions underlying the wolf management plan and correct any assumptions that have been shown to be erroneous by scientific research or field observations. We do that on a routine basis.

Montana's wolf plan is based on the concept of adaptive management. As such, we constantly assess new information and experience and adapt management along the way. The assumptions we made when developing the plan continue to appear reasonable and provide a sound basis for management actions.

Subsections (4)(B) and (C) on lines 8 through 11 on page 2 call for reconsideration of incremental control of wolf packs and implementation of a policy to provide lethal removal of a wolf following a single predation incident. We have, and will continue to evaluate incremental control as we gain experience. To date, though, incremental response to livestock depredation has shown advantages over complete pack removal in many circumstances.

Montana's plan does not preclude complete pack removal if there are more than 15 breeding pairs in the state and the specific circumstances warrant that action. Further, nothing in the plan precludes FWP from authorizing USDA-AHPIS Wildlife Services from lethally removing wolves based on a single depredation incident, and we have done that on a number of occasions. As the wolf population has increased, FWP has become more aggressive in response to depredation, just as anticipated in the plan.

Section 2 of the bill directs the department to initiate a process to notify all counties and their citizens of the location and movement of wolf packs. We already do this. Results of radio-tracking flights by our wolf specialists are posted on FWP's website as soon as possible by our field staff. Our wolf management specialists also make frequent phone calls or ranch visits to keep landowners informed about wolf activity. It is important to note though that while radio telemetry is an important management tool, FWP does not, and cannot, know where every wolf pack or individual wolf, is at all times any more than we know where every bear or lion is. No one should rely on telemetry to assess risks associated with wolves. Many types of wildlife can

pose a danger to people or livestock. There are many ways to minimize the risk and telemetry will always be a minor element in that regard.

Section 2 also directs FWP to establish a toll-free phone line for reporting wolf sightings. Given the distribution of our specialists and the wide variety of ways that the public can get information to FWP, including the wolf reporting feature on the FWP website, post cards, cell and office phones, and TIP-MONT, a 1-800 number for wolf sightings would simply duplicate existing avenues and create additional workload and expense that would take away field-based efforts.

We appreciate the sponsor's willingness to amend the bill to avoid any conflicts with delisting. What is left, then, is largely a bill that tells FWP to do what we are already doing, other than providing a toll-free phone line. We believe there are better ways to spend our limited resources for wolf management.